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RUEHDBU/AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE 0071  
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 3798  
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 2074  
RUEHK/T/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 0171  
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 7255  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L TASHKENT 002182

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USOSCE FOR ELIZABETH KAUFMAN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/28/2017  
TAGS: PREL PGOV KDEM OSCE UZ  
SUBJECT: ODIHR LIMITED OBSERVER MISSION TO UZBEKISTAN WAS  
"WORTHWHILE"

REF: A. TASHKENT 2115  
1B. TASHKENT 2179

Classified By: Poloff Tim Buckley for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

11. (C) Summary: On December 26 Ambassador and DCM had an outbrief with Ambassador Walter Siegl, who headed the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) limited election observer mission for the Presidential elections in Uzbekistan. Siegl reported that, although the complete picture of the elections was not observable, the ODIHR election mission "was worthwhile and we gained insights." In a December 26 meeting between Siegl and MFA's Chief of International Organizations Section Durbek Amanov, the GOU objected to several points cited in ODIHR's official press release about the elections, which ODIHR will consider in its final report. First Deputy FM Nematov elaborated on this in a December 27 meeting with the Ambassador. Siegl noted that the GOU did not offer sufficient access to the Central Election Commission (CEC) and its subordinate offices, making it impossible to trace votes from the ballot box to the final tabulations. He hopes commonly observed irregularities, such as heads of household casting ballots for entire families, can be raised with the GOU "at the appropriate time." The final report will have "a political direction" in order to encourage dialogue and not slam the door shut on future elections cooperation with Uzbekistan. The press release was tougher than we expected. The key questions are whether the Karimov regime brushes off criticism of its faulty election and relaxes in the wake of its victory, or whether it will take away something constructive from the criticism and implement election reforms before the scheduled 2009 Parliamentary elections, or whether it will just lash out at OSCE and/or others who were publicly critical of the election. End summary.

A Worthwhile Endeavor

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¶12. (C) Ambassador and DCM met with Ambassador Siegl in Tashkent on December 26 to recap the limited election observer mission and discuss its initial findings. Siegl said that, although the complete picture of the elections was not observable, the effort was "worthwhile, and we gained insights." The final report will also be limited in scope, but Siegl noted it will be necessary to restate that Uzbekistan has not implemented ODIHR's recommendations from the 2004 elections unless the GOU can demonstrate otherwise.

GOU Rebuttal  
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¶13. (C) Siegl also met on December 26 with Deputy Foreign Minister Amanov, who diplomatically presented the GOU's objections to several points highlighted in the December 24 ODIHR press release. The GOU insists that it has "completely" implemented the ODIHR recommendations that followed the 2004 Parliamentary elections and will provide specific written documentation of this, which Siegl will happily consider before issuing the final report. Amanov also disputed assessments of the noncompetitive nature of the campaign, and explained that it is inconsistent with Uzbek cultural traditions "to get at each others' throats." Amanov told Siegl that, unlike in some western countries, Uzbekistan does not want smear campaigns. Concerning the candidates' public support for their incumbent opponent, Amanov stressed that "their opinions were close" because it is difficult to object to programs that "further the good of the country."

¶14. (C) Amanov also gently pointed out to Siegl that the ODIHR team was the only observer mission that presented criticisms of the Presidential elections. In contrast, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), select bilateral observers, and numerous GOU-invited individual observers had positive assessments of the elections. The state-controlled media has, for the most part, made no mention of the ODIHR observation findings; although, in one website article (<http://gzt.uz/rus/politika>) the Director of the pro-government National Press Center rebuffed OSCE's criticism and accused the organization of remaining silent about "leading geopolitical players" interfering with the internal affairs of Central Asian states during elections. (See reftel B for more about media coverage of the elections.)

¶15. (C) Deputy FM Nematov elaborated on Amanov's objections in a December 27 meeting with the Ambassador. Nematov stressed that the GOU did not agree with any of ODIHR's findings, and found it "paradoxical" out of all the international observers present, "only" OSCE found cause for concern. This reflected OSCE's "double standard," Nematov said. The Ambassador noted that U.S. Embassy observers had also spotted irregularities, including lack of transparency in the central vote count, but that our fundamental concerns centered less on the procedural aspects of voting day and more on the lack of genuine choices and debate in the overall campaign. Nematov asserted that OSCE's statement had been prepared well in advance of voting day, and the ODIHR team had simply mouthed what was expected of it. He claimed there had been genuine debate, and that unanimous lines between the various candidates simply reflected (as Amanov said) everyone's view that Karimov's programs had been good for the country. However, when pressed, Nematov agreed that the door to OSCE would be kept open for a dialogue on election procedures ("as long as there are no double standards.")

Mysterious Tabulations  
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¶16. (C) Siegl said the ODIHR team documented numerous instances in which one individual signed the registry multiple times, generally for family members at the same address. He listened attentively to our accounts of emboffs separately witnessing multiple voting as a standard operating

procedure, and hopes that this issue will be raised with the GOU "at the appropriate time." However, his chief complaint was that the GOU provided insufficient access to the Central Election Commission and its subordinate offices, particularly with regard to computerized registries and voting records. The restricted access meant that it was simply not possible to trace a given vote from the polling station ballot box to the centrally-compiled tabulations. This was not transparent and there was no way to compare final statistics with voter registries. The ODIHR observers were also unable to continually track the ballots and individual polling stations' protocols in tabulating the votes, as they were transported from polling stations to the district center.

Report Won't Slam the Door Shut

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17. (C) Although there were numerous -- and unsurprising -- irregularities, Siegl said that he wants to give the final report "a political direction". He does not want to "slam the door shut on Uzbekistan" entirely and will note positive elements such as the presence of a woman and a non-partisan candidate on the ballot. He added that, just as it was important for his team to arrive without preconceived notions about Uzbekistan's past, "so it is important not to harbor preconceived notions about the future."

OSCE/ODIHR Follow-Up?

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18. (C) Asked if there is some process in place by which ODIHR can follow up its proposed recommendations to the GOU, particularly in the run-up to the scheduled Parliamentary elections in 2009, Siegl said it was likely that the Uzbek representative to the OSCE in Vienna would be queried informally about GOU reaction to ODIHR's recommendations. Emboffs also made the point to Siegl that a key political reform would be easing up the requirements for political parties/movements to register and then registering them, permitting them to field candidates in the 2009 parliamentary elections.

Comment

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19. (C) Although Siegl wants to keep the door open for future dialogue and engagement with the GOU on elections, the ODIHR press release was tougher than we expected based on initial conversations with the ODIHR team (reftel A). The GOU may hope that the elections will quickly fade from the West's critical memory during the holidays, but the final ODIHR report will be issued in mid-January when interest may be rekindled. A key question is whether the Karimov regime, secure in victory, will brush off criticism, learn from it and continue reengagement, or take offense to the criticism, sulk, and lash out at the critics.

NORLAND